

CONCEPTUAL INTEGRATION AS A SOURCE OF DISCOURSE COHERENCE:
A THEORETICAL APPROACH WITH SOME EXAMPLES FROM
WILLIAM BOYD'S "MY GIRL IN SKIN-TIGHT JEANS"

Pilar Alonso
Universidad de Salamanca
alonso@usal.es

This article explores the cognitive component of discourse coherence using the parameters established by the conceptual integration network model. It contends that together with other more widely studied facets of coherence construction (e.g. semantic and pragmatic), the cognitive operations described in the four-space model of cognition play an active and decisive role in the building and maintenance of coherence at the representational level, and that their identification provides excellent analytical tools. This claim is supported with evidence from William Boyd's short story "My Girl in Skin-Tight Jeans," which presents an extremely tight blend between the real and the unreal in the mind of the protagonist. Unfolding this blend, and recognising the cognitive operations at work, helps us identify some of the resources employed in the story to achieve a skilfully planned and highly complex coherent effect.

The description of conceptual integration networks (Fauconnier and Turner 1998, 2000, 2001; Turner 2000; Grady, Oakley and Coulson 1999; Grady 2000; Coulson and Oakley 2000) as one of the basic cognitive modes humans have to relate with their environment has demonstrated the importance that mental processes have, not only in our thinking and reasoning activities, but also in the construction and interpretation of discourse. Central to these processes are conceptual projections, which connect elements from different knowledge domains, experiential areas and/or on-line created mental spaces, to facilitate the categorization and apprehension of (usually complex) aspects of reality in terms of other (usually more simple) constructs (such as basic concepts, mental images, image schemas, mental models, etc.), from which they borrow structure that is relevant for their characterization and understanding. Among the many cognitive operations involved in conceptual projections, Fauconnier and Turner (1994, 1998, 2001) emphasize blending and consider it prior even to metaphorical mappings (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Lakoff 1987, 1993; Lakoff and Turner 1989) which, contrary to the theory of conceptual metaphor, they do not see as one-way straightforward projections between a source domain and a target domain but as a multifaceted process, involving at least two middle spaces (a generic one and a blend) where common relevant structure is selected and new structure is created. Blending analysis presupposes that the new structure which emerges from the blend together with the inferences it originates constitute the new cognitive/semantic content which the target domain (or output mental space) inherits from the source domain as a result of this complex conceptual interaction.

The need to introduce intermediate spaces in the primitive two-domain model of human cognition designed by the theory of conceptual metaphor in order to perform blending analysis, together with the detailed description of the many cognitive moves identified in the creation of the blend, has made the theory expand into more comprehensive versions which are able to provide for all the variations encountered; the most recent development is the conceptual integration network model (Fauconnier and Turner 1998, 2001), which actually derives from the former blending theory (Fauconnier and Turner 1994). The multiple space model with which the theory of conceptual integration works allows for the representation of cognitive entities of variable complexity which may involve numerous operations, such as selective projection, compression, composition, completion, elaboration, etc. (Fauconnier and Turner 2001). These operations do not exclude one another, on the contrary, they are commonly interactive and work on-line when required by the cognitive situation created. Turner (2000) remarks that these operations are not generally observable on the surface; they tend to escape consciousness, and therefore require specific analysis for their identification.

Equal in function and operational procedure to these mental means of meaning creation, Turner (2000) cites narrative as one more kind of cognitive operation. This gives an idea of the broad scope covered by the theory of conceptual integration and of the potential uses its application may bring to the analysis of complex discourse, including more specifically, and for the interest of this paper, complex literary discourse (both narrative and non-narrative). Research done in this field (Alonso, forthcoming) has shown that looking at literary discourse from the parameters of the conceptual network model sheds light onto many of the intricacies typical of this type of text. It has demonstrated that differentiating cognitive levels, and unpacking the mental complexities of the speakers involved (whether they are the real author or any fictional voices: narrator/characters), helps us to reason how and why a given interpretation may have been achieved. Furthermore, it also helps to explain how coherence is built even in those cases which may have been perceived as incoherent at first sight. This is precisely the idea that is to be explored in these pages; that is, the contribution that a cognitive approach, using the integration network model as a basis, has to make to the study of discourse coherence.

Coherence is a multifaceted and quite elusive component of discourse reality, which requires a wide range of linguistic and non-linguistic data for its thorough description: structural, semantic, pragmatic and conceptual, as has been amply shown in the literature (van Dijk 1977, 1980, 1985, 1997; van Dijk and Kintsch 1982; de Beaugrande 1980, 1997; de Beaugrande and Dressler 1981; Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Brown and Yule 1983; Johnson-Laird 1983; Sperber and Wilson 1995; Cook 1989; Hatch 1992; Blakemore 1992, 2001; Schiffrin et al. 2001; Bernárdez 1995; Alonso 1999, 2002; Wilson and Matsui 2000). Using evidence from a simple but highly compelling story by William Boyd, "My Girl in Skin-Tight Jeans," this paper will discuss some of the many factors interacting in the building of coherence. Some aspects pertaining to the fields of discourse semantics and relevance theory will be considered first, and special emphasis will be placed on the contribution that the conceptual integration network model has to make to the subject. It will illustrate how the distinction of the different levels of consciousness that co-exist in cognition, and which may be brought together into one single mental space by means of various cognitive operations, constitutes a source of discourse coherence, making it

possible to construct a wholly compatible mental representation of apparently incompatible concurrent worlds. Other possible cognitive approaches to coherence such as those based on the theory of mental models (Johnson-Laird 1983) or schema theory (Cook 1994) will not be contemplated here.

“My Girl in Skin-Tight Jeans” tells the story of a man who spends his winters in a small resort town leading a quiet and very simple life, devoted mostly to his favourite entertainment: the reading and viewing of illustrated magazines, which currently he says he values more than literature. At the time of the narration, he speaks of the appearance in town of a bright young girl, dressed in a white T-shirt and skin-tight jeans. He cherishes and loves this girl from a distance, and feels devastated when one day a group of three young men—whom he describes as “hooligans”—arrive in town and start laughing and making obscene gestures when they catch a glimpse of “his” girl in jeans. That night, he figures the girl will go to the beach and despairs when he sees the three men are also going there. When he arrives at the beach and sees no trace of the girl, he fears for the worst and has visions of rape and crime. He accuses the three men and shoots one while the other two escape. The following morning he has the intuition that she is gone for ever and only feels relieved when he sees a man working on the billboard across the street from his window, posting an advertisement of an appetizing drink that makes him forget the girl. Only then is the reader able to confirm any previous inferences s/he may have drawn about the actual nature of the admired girl herself.

From a semantic point of view, and concentrating on the macrostructural level (van Dijk 1977, 1980, 1985, 1997; van Dijk and Kintsch 1982), there are various signs of coherence in the story, basically connected with the phenomena of language selection and strategic large-scope recurrence. Previous research done on the subject (Alonso 2002) has demonstrated that the recurrent use of elements of different nature (semantic, pragmatic, cognitive) running through extensive spans of text has a sustained cohesive effect, which contributes to the building of global coherence. Thus, if reiteration of, let us say, a lexical element, which in principle and at the local level acts primarily as a cohesive device (Halliday and Hasan 1976), is upheld throughout the totality of a text of considerable length, its use may become significant for the establishment of coherence, as it will help to develop an inherent discursive trait which will serve to define the global meaning of the text and will favour its interpretation as a coherent whole. This is in agreement with de Beaugrande (1980, 1997) and de Beaugrande and Dressler’s (1981) claim that there exists interaction between all mutually relevant components of any textual unit (in this particular case cohesion and coherence).

A most clarifying example of this phenomenon in Boyd’s story is the lexical, structural and propositional repetition encountered in the description of both the girl and the drink at the beginning and ending of the story respectively, the strategic distance between these recurrent elements being macrostructurally significant. “She was definitely my kind of girl,” the protagonist says, when he starts appropriating her image (Boyd 1982: 118), and by the end of the narration he produces the same sort of comment when he contemplates the new ad:

And as the new advertisement took shape, I found I was forgetting about the girl as she disappeared, with her impossibly white T-shirt and her ludicrously skin-tight jeans.

I stood there at the window a while, just looking.

Yes, I thought to myself. Yes. Definitely my kind of drink. Mellow, with the real tanny glow. . . ." (Boyd 1982: 124)

These are exactly the words with which the story ends, and the repetition of the same phrase "Definitely my kind of [girl/drink]," unveils for the reader the dual nature of the textual universe, real and imagined, that the character (both narrator and protagonist of the story) has been putting together throughout the narration. They serve to validate or invalidate all the presuppositions and inferences that may have been made during the interpretation process.

There are other factors which also play an active role in the development of discourse coherence at the lexico-semantic level. For example, the emotional and positive language that is selected to talk about the protagonist's "passion for reading [magazines]" is similar to the language he uses to describe the girl. About magazines, he says: "I like the bright happy illustrations and I have been progressively coming round to the opinion that magazines are, indeed, more imaginative than many novels. The world of the glossy magazine holds more allure for me than the grimy realistic tragedies that pass for literature these days" (Boyd 1982: 117). In the same vein, he describes the girl as "a modern primavera," "a rare remarkable personality . . . beautiful too . . . always fresh and well-laundered. She is the most truly at-ease person I've ever come across: there is an astonishing serenity which beams out of her eyes" (Boyd 1982: 118). It contrasts with the gloominess of the language which the character uses to describe his daily routine, and which acts as counterpoint turning the story into a solid whole. This is one of the views he gives of the place where he usually takes his meals: "the place was a real toilet. I sat at my usual table and waited for Loretta to come and clear it up. It was swimming with spilt coffee, the ashtray was full of butts and someone had ground out a cigar in a half eaten cake of pancakes" (Boyd 1982: 119). In that way, two wide-ranging frames are activated and contrasted by the consistent use of semantic collocates (Halliday and Hasan 1976), whose primary local function is, once again, cohesive.

From the pragmatic perspective of relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1995; Blakemore 1992, 2001; Wilson and Matsui 2000), there are also easily detectable signs of discourse coherence which actually interact with the data used for the semantic argumentation above. The Communicative Principle of Relevance contends that "every utterance communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance" (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 158; Wilson and Matsui 2000: 120). In accordance with this principle, if we consider the contextual and personal information that the character offers at the beginning of the story, and the thematic importance that this initial position involves (Halliday 1985; Downing 2001; Gómez-González 2001), everything he says about himself becomes both ostensibly relevant and indexically referential to the situation later presented in the narrative, and has the capacity to trigger off a significant interpretation which may be assumed to fit the author's intended configuration of thoughts and events:

I would like to make one thing clear before I tell my story. I don't want you to think that because I have never married that there is any kind of . . . of a problem between me and the female sex. I could in fact have married any number of girls had I so chosen—but I didn't choose to, so there it is. It was a question of my health, you see. I do not have a strong constitution and largely for that reason I decided, once my dear mother had died, to remain a bachelor.

My mother left me a small legacy along with the house. I live quietly and economically there. (Boyd 1982: 117)

The character's allusions to his unmarried condition, possible sexual problems, poor health, mother dependence, both affectively and economically, work as antecedents for the extremely effective and rather damaging conjunction that exists in the narrative between his happy fantasies (with the magazines, the girl, the drink) and his utterly dreary experience (the murky café, the insolent hooligans). He even connects them explicitly in one of the accounts he gives of his routine: "This last winter . . . I had been chronically depressed through most of January and February and if it hadn't been for the regular arrival of my magazines with their laughing happy people in their primary-coloured world I'm sure I would have done something drastic" (Boyd 1982: 118). Thus, the concurrence of the real and the imaginary in the protagonist's experiential universe, which has been intentionally encoded in the text by the author, becomes accessible to the reader and acquires a high degree of relevance, sufficient enough to gradually build and finally confirm an interesting set of interpretive presuppositions.

But the fact that this double-sided reality appears in the text as perfectly joined together in the character's mind, and is accepted as such by the reader, is even better explained and more rationally understood if we adopt a cognitive perspective. One of the obvious advantages of incorporating a comprehensive cognitive approach such as the conceptual integration network model to the analysis of a complex communicative construction, such as the story we are considering here, is that the operations it describes run through all those aspects which are usually of interest for discourse description, including those contemplated here from the more specific and single-focused theoretical perspectives of semantics and pragmatics (Fauconnier and Turner 2001). This pervasiveness often results in a tightly-built vision and/or presentation of facts, thoughts, actions or events which turn out to be extremely clarifying when they are unpacked.

It is generally assumed by those working in the field of coherence from a broad perspective that "text comprehension involves the construction of a coherent mental representation of the situations described by the text" (Lowerse 2001: 291), an assumption that is applicable to all texts of whichever type. The construction of this mental representation is something which does not affect the process of comprehension alone, including the genre-associated expectations that might have been developed by readers; it also concerns the process of production as it preconditions any mental representation built in the course of reception. In a case of fictional narrative similar to the one that is being considered here, and given the embedded nature of fiction (Adams 1985), there are at least three communicative levels which could be explored: the author-reader level, the narrator-narratee level, and the characters' level. It is a fact, however, that the most accessible means the analyst as reader has to reach the hypothetically different mental representations of all the voices involved, real and fictional, is through the verbal text itself (other means would be personal consultation with the author when possible, or the consideration of other intertextual resources such as biographical or bibliographical data). Here we will use exclusively the verbal text as object of analysis, as it is its quality as a coherent unit that we wish to investigate, and will focus only on the fictional level as represented by the voice of its narrator/protagonist, in an attempt to unveil the conceptual

configuration underlying the narrative through exploration of the language used. As was mentioned above, in “My Girl in Skin-Tight Jeans,” narrator and protagonist coincide, which simplifies the procedure considerably (as a matter of fact the only other voices present in the narration are those of the hooligans, who produce twenty-eight words in an eight-page story).

We have already quoted passages from the short story which pointed to the existence of a double reality neatly fused in the character’s mind. This, which in the real world would surely be diagnosed as a sort of mental disorder, becomes a productive source of discourse coherence in the language universe of this fictional work, as it integrates separate levels of represented reality into one single level of cognition, converting the narration into a well-adjusted harmonic whole. If the perspective of the conceptual integration network model is applied to analyse the seemingly incoherent nature of the events narrated in the story, there is the need to reconstruct, first of all, the hypothetical mental representation which the narrator/protagonist builds of these events. According to the theory, mental representations involve the creation of interrelated mental spaces among which much of the activity taking place in the human cognitive system develops. Mental spaces are cognitive constructs created ad hoc in the language user’s mind to represent facts and actions occurring in discourse and/or reality (Fauconnier 1985, 1988). These mental spaces play an intermediate role between language and the world (real or, as in this case, fictional) and are connected by conceptual projections and operations of many kinds (analogical, metaphorical, metonymic, counterfactual, etc.).

The case presented in “My Girl with Skin-Tight Jeans” offers a good illustration of the decisive function which the construction of individually-shaped mental spaces acquires in the assignment of different interpretations to reality, and the many visions which may result from them. The equal treatment that the narrator/protagonist gives to all secondary characters in the story (i.e. to those whose actions he witnesses and to those who are but a product of his active imagination), works as an indicator of the existence in the mind of the protagonist of one single mental space that hosts the representation of both worlds (the real and the imagined). This highly complicated and unique mental space, which the reader gradually discovers as the story advances, is actually a blend where the frontier dividing the real from the imagined disappears and an impossible combination of living and represented people is made possible. Thus, the blend facilitates the emergence of a distinctive, new, utterly personal reality, the description of which constitutes in fact the core of the narration. The following passage, which precedes the dramatic outcome of the strange relationship the protagonist maintains with the girl and the hooligans, will serve to illustrate the extremely tight fusion of real and unreal elements that co-occur in the protagonist’s mental configuration of the events which surround him:

At dusk I went to a small supermarket that I sometimes buy provisions at when I don’t feel like going out to eat. I was reaching for a tin of clam chowder when I saw the girl through the window. I was a little surprised. Usually I never managed to see her this late and I always wondered where she went. But tonight it was obvious; her eyes were gazing out to sea, her easy stride would carry her determinedly down to the beach.

The clam chowder tasted like earth. I couldn’t clear my mouth of it so I drank a glass or two of rye. I opened the window that gives me a sea view and sat on the sill looking out at the darkening waters. Quite a way along the beach I could see the glimmer of a campfire

burning and I knew at once that was where the girl would be—out there alone. Maybe she had cooked something and was enjoying the peace and the absolute solitude. Then I could imagine her stripping off her clothes, her tan body with white bikini patches maybe. . . .

But then I was distracted by the noise of raucous laughter in the street below. The three youths, half bombed, spilling out of the liquor store clutching six-packs and a bottle of wine. With a bizarre sense of mounting premonition I watched them laughing and joshing for a while in the street. Then one of them said “Hey, look. A fire.” And with whistles and whoops they went running down the board-walk, all heroic with beer, jumping gleefully onto the sand and heading up the beach towards my girl. (Boyd 1982: 121)

There is some lack of balance in the protagonist’s narration which the reader intuitively perceives. The effect is mainly achieved through the alternative use of factual and non-factual language (e.g. descriptive past tenses vs. epistemic modals and adverbs) to frame on equal grounds and at the same level what the narrator/protagonist actually experiences and what he imagines. This subtle perception of a clash in the events recounted activates in the reader a double universe, corresponding to the real and the hypothetical. The fact that in the next scene the protagonist goes down to the beach, fights with the youths and shoots one of them (to avenge the mysterious, finally fictitious girl), adds to the increasing feeling of uncertainty which the reader must resolve if s/he wishes to obtain a credible and convincing image of the situation depicted. In order to be treated as acceptable, the uneven pieces of this double-sided reality must be put together and converted into one coherent whole, a single mental space capable of embracing all conditions alike.

For that purpose, the reader must create ad hoc a specific mental space which fits the protagonist’s own particular representation of reality, a reality which has among its components real people (e.g. the hooligans) and pictorial reproductions of people (e.g. the girl) on an equal basis. At one end of this integration process, that which the reader takes as point of departure, the source or input space contains all the elements of reality as they appear for the majority of us, with a clear distinction between living entities and graphic illustrations. At the other end, the target or output space, which represents the totality of the story, already captures a distorted mental representation which responds to the character’s unconventional vision. In the target, there is no difference between real people and reproductions of people, the latter having inherited the qualities of the former. However mentally unbalancing this re-creation of reality may sound, it is possible to recover, at discourse level, the procedure underlying what seems to be its most likely interpretation, by means of the four-space model and the conceptual projections at work in it. Needless to say, the capacity to reason the unreasonable contributes to the achievement of discourse coherence.

The conceptual integration network model identifies at least four basic spaces: an input space and an output space (or source and target respectively), a middle generic space and a middle blended space (Fauconnier and Turner 1994, 1998, 2000, 2001). Projections between these spaces are not necessarily one-way mappings, as the earlier versions of the theory of conceptual metaphor contended (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Lakoff 1987, 1993; Lakoff and Turner 1989). On the contrary, more often than not, the projections taking place in the language users’ minds move across freely, benefiting from the cognitive operations performed in the middle spaces (the generic and the blended), which work as intermediate running fields for all sorts of transformations undergone at the source and

target. It is in these middle spaces where previously existent general knowledge and/or specific information coming from the source and target are first neutralized (in the general middle space), and then converted into a new emergent reality (in the blended space), which partakes of some of the properties contributed by the source and target but is exactly like none of them.

As has been said above, the conceptual integration network presumes the existence of a generic middle mental space, which contains “skeletal information” relevant to “the roles, frames and schemas common to the source and target” (Fauconnier and Turner 1994: 5, 6). This generic space interacts with another middle space, the blended space, which receives the simplified information projected from the generic and enriches it with projections from both the source and target, creating a new different conceptual structure which is able to generate its own inferences. In the case which is being studied here, “My Girl in Skin-Tight Jeans,” the generic space suppresses the distinction existing between the integrating components of the source or input space. That is, by means of this process of structure projection, real entities and pictorial reproductions of these entities are first deprived of their differential traits (alive/not-alive) in the generic space, and then equated in the blend, where they acquire a new set of properties (e.g. figures in pictures become real people), and are finally sent to the target as undifferentiated elements.

Many cognitive operations, which are usually performed on-line following the requirements of the information as it is received, may take part in a process of conceptual integration such as the one we are considering (Fauconnier and Turner 1998, 2001). The unpacking of the blend in “My Girl in Skin-Tight Jeans” involves at least operations of composition, completion, elaboration and compression. The most basic one is composition, which fuses the two types of entities (real/reproduction)—distinctively separate at the source—into a third indeterminate one, which becomes a part of the alternative mental reality emerging in the blended space; thus, “real” and “unreal” entities become just “entities” in the character’s mind. Through completion, pre-existing background knowledge is unconsciously used to fill all components of this new emergent reality with the attributes and qualities selected from elements in the source. Completion is responsible, for example, for the real sexual attraction, the feeling of possession and jealousy which the protagonist develops towards the unreal girl in the picture, as well as for his actual shooting of the man on account of the fictional girl. A third operation at work in the building of the story is elaboration, which adds the creative load of imagination to the blended space, thus expanding its actual contents. For example, the character enriches his imaginary representation of reality when he vividly thinks of the girl on the beach, and describes her actions in full detail. Finally compression fabricates, both for the fictional speaker and for his intended receiver (Adams 1985: 15), a single unified world which cancels the physical limits between reality and imagination.

All these conceptual projections and operations are presented in fiction to the reader as already encoded in the narrator/protagonist’s mental representation of reality; that is, the protagonist’s mental representation actually coincides with the blended space that has been described above. The complex conceptual structure consisting of four interrelated mental spaces that have been identified, in an attempt to bring some coherence into this apparently incoherent fictional world, are actually the tools which the writer—applying the standard conception of reality—uses to construct his story. Equally, at the other end

of the communicative process, it is the real reader (and not a corresponding fictional hearer) who unpacks the blend, employing exactly the same tools that were used by the writer. This interaction takes place effectively and even effortlessly thanks to the knowledge of the world (including previous knowledge of literary genre conventions) that both writer and reader share, and to their common system of cognition. The intricacy of this particular communicative process is a characteristic of the embedded nature of fiction, which sets up one level for its fictional participants (narrator/narratee, characters) and another for its real participants (author/reader). With the pertinent differences that must be established between the narrator/narratee mode of expression and that of the characters, the fictional voices have direct control over what they say, while the writer does that only indirectly through the rhetorical control he holds over his created fictional voices (Adams 1985: 59, 72). This rhetorical control serves him to fulfil his narrative plans and to manage the fictional situation. Interpreting the highly elaborate reality that results from this multifaceted configuration is evidently the task of the reader, who uses information from all the levels involved. That is why and how the integration of the four mental spaces, which the reader must recreate in order to fully comprehend the fictional reality presented, works efficiently despite the fact that they are situated on totally dissimilar planes. This is actually a challenging pragmatic issue which will be explored in depth elsewhere.

What is of relevance for the aim of this paper is that, however unrealistic it may seem, the resulting textual world—constructed ad hoc for the sake of creativity—is fully believable and coherent. Actually, the reader would accept the totality of it with no reservations were it not for those key elements that the writer sporadically introduces, signalling the inconsistency of certain facts, thus establishing a mutual communicative complicity from which the protagonist/narrator remains aloof. These crucial elements are linguistic expressions which have already been commented on (such as the use of non-factual language to talk about the girl or the use of factual language to talk about reality). They are all relevant as they convey essential information which guides the reader in his/her understanding and interpretation of the story; they also form a significant part of the semantic macrostructure of the narration, especially because they are realised through long-scope cohesive resources which keep being re-used throughout the text.

The conclusions of this study thus show: first, that the application of the conceptual integration network model is a valid method to reveal the intricacies encountered in complex discourse, and to provide a rational and thorough interpretation of apparently incoherent data. Conceptual integration proves therefore a solid means of coherence construction, and investigation of the resources it employs helps describe important aspects of discourse coherence. Second, that conceptual integration does not constitute a source of discourse coherence in isolation; as happens with all other constituents involved in the dynamics of discourse processes, it interacts with other more traditionally considered techniques of coherence achievement such as large-scope semantic recurrence (lexical, structural, propositional), or the principle of communicative relevance. As usual, focusing on one aspect or the other may be a question of professional interest, methodological convenience, and/or prominence of some particular traits in the discourse under consideration.

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